

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

*Media Office
Democratic Caucus
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Statehouse, Room 157*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
June 3, 2005**

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WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT NEXT STATE AGENCY TO FEEL GOVERNOR'S STING; MORE THAN 100 WORKERS COULD LOSE JOBS, THANKS TO REORGANIZATION

INDIANAPOLIS – Indiana's Department of Workforce Development is the next state agency that will fall prey to the "government efficiency" steamroller of Gov. Mitch Daniels, with more than 100 workers there expected to lose their jobs in the weeks to come, according to State Reps. Linda Lawson (D-Hammond) and Duane Cheney (D-Portage).

"Starting the week of June 6, the Department of Workforce Development will implement a plan designed to have all deputies who handle unemployment claims be centrally located in Indianapolis," Lawson said. "They will achieve this plan by closing down offices in more than 20 locations around the state. The closings will take place in three phases, with everything set to be completed by mid-July.

"Claims deputies in these offices have been given a choice: retain their jobs and move to Indianapolis or refuse to move and be laid off," Cheney explained. "While Workforce Development is claiming only about 50 employees will be laid off under this plan, representatives for the workers say that close to 140 people could lose their jobs."

He said the change is being portrayed as an effort to reduce costs, improve efficiency and standardize service. In 2003, Lawson authored a law to allow eligible domestic violence victims the ability to receive unemployment benefits. She is concerned that domestic violence victims would not be able to meet with claims agents personally and not get their claims processed quickly.

"Currently a claims deputy meets with the victims personally and often can process the claim in less than a day," said Lawson. "If the claims deputies are moved to Indianapolis, the victims will have to call an impersonal 'call center.' The result will be that many of these people who are in great need of assistance will not receive the help they need or, at least, not receive it in a timely fashion. That would be a tragic situation which could be avoided by leaving these deputies in the local areas where they can best serve the people they are hired to help.

"Victims of domestic violence are tied to their abusers by economic dependence," explained Lawson. "Helping them obtain unemployment benefits allows these victims to gain economic freedom, which means simply being able to pay bills and provide basic necessities for their children. These women need to be able to talk face-to-face with someone who is not located three hours away. In addition, they need overnight decisions made so they and their children can escape an abusive and dangerous situation."

Cheney said one of his constituents is a claims deputy who would have to move to Indianapolis on short notice or lose her job. He said the woman, who is only two years away from retirement, just signed her apartment lease and would not be able to continue to care for her gravely ill parents.

Cheney also mentioned that Gov. Daniels' Daylight Saving Time initiative would cause additional problems for Northwest Indiana residents who would have to phone a "call center."

"Our region would be an hour behind Indianapolis year-round," said Cheney. "That means people who need help would have to try to call when the 'call center' was open. The center would be open for business when most of us up here were still eating breakfast. That also means callers would have to avoid the Indianapolis lunch hour. And that means you had better not call after 3:30 p.m. our time, because the work day would already be over in Indianapolis.

"I was always under the impression that state government, including Workforce Development, was supposed to serve the people of Indiana and that means all the people of Indiana, not just the ones who live in Indianapolis," Cheney added. "It is time the Daniels administration learned that it should work for the citizens of our state rather than the citizens having to make sacrifices to serve the whims of the governor's appointees."

"This announcement has been handled in much the same way that the Daniels Administration has handled other decisions to make government more efficient," Lawson said. "These workers were unaware of what was happening until they were contacted by their superiors in mid-May and told to make a choice: move or leave.

"Consider the circumstances that most of these workers will be facing," she said. "These ladies and gentlemen are being asked to uproot their families and move to a new city in just a few weeks. If they did not want to do that, they were going to lose their jobs."

Cheney noted that unions representing these workers will have little recourse, since the governor issued an executive order in January that took away their right to collectively bargain on working conditions and other benefits.

"Too often it seems this administration is so single-minded in its efforts to improve government that it doesn't take the time to examine the long-range impact of its decisions," Cheney said. "The reason to have these offices around the state was to make it easier for Hoosiers who have lost their jobs to apply for unemployment benefits. Once this change is completed, if you've lost your job, you're going to have to call Indianapolis to get assistance. This is efficiency?

"I won't comment on the irony of unemployment claims deputies being forced into unemployment, but I cannot let this opportunity pass without saying something about the efforts of an administration that doesn't seem interested in anything but the bottom line," he added.

"People who have lost their jobs through down-sizing and company relocations overseas deserve to receive the strongest support possible from their government. They do not deserve what they will be getting from this administration: a long distance telephone call to someone who might answer. The people who thought up this plan should be ashamed of themselves," Cheney concluded.